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Simon McKeown



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P U B L I S H I N G

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRE-ALCIATO EMBLEMS?: DANIEL AGRICOLA'S *VITA BEATI* FROM THE YEAR 1511\*

SERAINA PLOTKE

The birth year of emblematics is generally considered to be 1531, the year woodcut illustrations were added in the printing of the Latin ecphrastic epigrams of the Milan legal scholar Andrea Alciato.<sup>1</sup> Printed in Augsburg and entitled *Emblematum liber*, the book was immediately well received and in the following years often reprinted, adapted, and translated. Its arrangement of superscript, image, and epigram, expanded in the 1534 Paris edition to the full-page layout that from then on would be typical, set a trend, providing a model for the veritable flood of emblem books published during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the title of the collection provided a name for the new genre.

As important as Alciato's *Emblematum liber* was for the genre, the addition of woodcut illustrations to a work printed in 1531 was not at all unusual. Just as we have especially beautiful illustrated manuscripts in particular from the fifteenth century, likewise the first hundred years of printing brought forth a rich array of book illustrations. Books on the most various subjects and in a great many genres were illustrated.<sup>3</sup>

Among the thematic areas where the art of book illustration experienced its most prolific development were fool's narratives and edifying literature. These had in common a moral-didactic intention. The most famous early example of a printed book with illustrations is Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools), which within a few years of its *editio princeps* in 1494 was reprinted and translated several times. With regard to edifying literature, collections of prayers and sermons (*Postillen*) and books on the gospels (*Evangelienbücher*) were exceedingly popular.

Although this is not the place for further examination of the many illustrated books published in the early decades of printing culture, these



works give us some indication of what an important role both book illustration and bimodality, the conjunction of text and image to create a new whole, played for book printing in the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century. Questions in each instance concerning the relationship between text and image and the function of bimodality cannot be answered in a general way, but need to be examined using a concrete example.

The life story of St Beatus is such an example; it was written by the Basel Minorite Daniel Agricola, and a Latin version was printed in Basel in 1511 by Adam Petri. Soon thereafter—probably in the same print shop—an Early New High German version followed. The *Vita* of St Beatus can be summarized as follows:

Suetonius, as the saint was originally named, lived in England in the first century AD. After his conversion by Barnabus and baptism as Beatus, the young man left for Rome, where he became a follower of Peter and passed through the various degrees of consecration to the priesthood. Sent on a mission by the Pope, Beatus, with his companion Achates, crossed the Alps into the territory of the Helvetians, where he preached the Gospels. After some preliminary resistance, he persuaded the people to abjure their heathen gods and submit to baptism. To make a living, Beatus wove baskets, and in this way obtained food not only for himself, but for others in need. As his path led him through many cities and regions, he entered the vicinity of Interlaken. There he heard of a dragon that was ravaging the area. Beatus, with his companion Achates, took a boat across the lake, found the dragon's cave, and drove it out with God's help. Thereafter, the saint lived out his life in the cave in the greatest abstinence and piety. At the age of 90 he fell ill and—as Agricola records—died in the year 112 AD. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried near the dragon's cave, and from then on, as a sign of his holiness, the sick were liberated from their sufferings at the grave of Beatus. Later Achates was buried at his side.

For our discussion here, more important than the legend's content is the book's layout. After an introductory letter and a short poem in honour of Beatus, the legend is recounted, divided into fifteen prose chapters. Each of these fifteen chapters occupies two facing pages. On the verso page there is a woodcut by Urs Graf containing the chapter title and an epigram of two distichs. On the recto page there is an abbreviated title and the chapter's prose text (Fig. 4.1).

This design of the Latin printing corresponds almost completely to the Early New High German edition - with one notable exception obviously related to an alteration in text function.<sup>4</sup> The introductory sections are

taken over with the greatest exactitude, and the graphic distribution of prose chapters and woodcuts with their respective titles is maintained. But missing in the Early New High German printing are the epigrams beneath the woodcuts (Fig. 4.2). We can show the significance of these epigrams in the Latin edition by looking at a few examples.

Chapter 5 of the Latin *Vita* has as its title “De fructuosa fidelium regeneratione” (Fig. 4.3). The print graphics clearly mark it as the title for the woodcut and epigram: above the prose text there is only an abbreviated variant. In its use of the word *regeneratione* it establishes a connection to the Vulgate and also to Augustine, where attainment of the kingdom of God is discussed.<sup>5</sup> This word appears only in a Christian context and is used at the same time as a *terminus technicus*. In addition to meaning “rebirth” it also means “salvation of the soul” and “baptism”. The attributive adjective *fructuosus* strengthens the connection with the New Testament. After all, Matthew 7, 16 states, “You will know them by their fruits.”

The epigram that appears to comment on the scene represented in the woodcut says: “Drive out deluded sin by the doctrine of virtue, that blessed hearts may understand the true faith. No one conveys the true faith in Christ with sin. Jesus himself called these false heralds of salvation.” As long as the legend’s prose text is the referent of the picture, the bearded man in the woodcut is identified with Beatus, who baptizes the heathens. But in its relationship with the epigram, the scene represented in the woodcut is given a general character, representing any preacher of Christianity who fights against disbelief. Strictly speaking, the motto-like superscript referring to the New Testament also contributes to a generalization of the depicted scene, something that becomes even clearer when contrasted with the corresponding chapter title in the Early New High German version, for there it says: “Zu dem funften: Wie sant Bat die abgöttery zerstört/vnd das volck wyrd von im getoufft” (To the fifth: How St Beatus destroys idolatry and the people are baptized by him.)

In the Latin version, superscript and epigram lead to another interpretation of the represented scene. The reader is called upon not only to uphold the Christian doctrines for himself, but actually to preach, which only becomes possible when one has freed oneself from sin. As the superscript makes clear, this is the way that entry into the kingdom of God is guaranteed. Thus the combination of superscript, woodcut, and epigram in the Latin edition can be interpreted independently as a meaningful whole, which in connection with the saint’s *vita* can, but need not be, augmented with additional layers of meaning.

This generalizing structure is evident in almost all fifteen chapters of the Latin version, including in places where the connection to the saint's legend is even greater, and clear content connections seem to exist between the woodcut image and the legend's text, as we can show using Chapters 9 and 10 as examples. The title of the ninth chapter is "De Draconis inventione cautelosa" (Fig. 4.4). Its epigram can be translated as follows: "A horrendous dragon covered with scales urges you to sin. The dragon himself creates its havoc in concealment, but the lion does so openly. Be deaf to the lion's roars, and tear the throat of the dragon, which deceives the pitiful ones with his artfulness." Chapter 10 is entitled: "De draconis expulsionem animosa" (Fig. 4.5). Here the epigram asserts: "Whatever we aspire to in heartfelt prayer will come to pass, when the soul's salvation is at stake, and when you ask for it with reason. Humble pleas rise up to sublime heaven, the virtues of the rich one subdue all that is wild and dull-witted."

According to the Apocalypse of John (Revelation 20, 2), the dragon is to be equated with the Devil; he is Satan and the Antichrist. This image-type of a winged, slithering, scaly reptile with head and front claws of a wolf-like predator that stands for everything evil and inimical, for all kinds of plagues and tribulations, had already been developed by the early Middle Ages. In the allegorical dictionaries that were so popular in both the Middle Ages and the early modern period, one finds not only this interpretation, but the comparison between the dragon working in concealment and the lion which fights in the open.<sup>6</sup>

Although, given the prose texts on the facing pages, the woodcuts of Chapters 9 and 10 seem inseparably connected to the saint's life, since Beatus does find and expel the dragon terrorizing the region, this connection can also be left out completely and a meaningful whole will still remain. If the superscript, woodcut, and epigram are taken alone, both of the text-image configurations can be read as behavioural instructions for the recipient, who is supposed to detect the threat from the ever-lurking Devil and, with the help of prayer and Christian faith, render him powerless in order to reach salvation. In this case, then, the saint's *vita* is only an occasion to communicate certain general Christian behavioural maxims, which are mediated *via* interpreting the representation of a *res significans*.

In view of these characteristic text-image connections in the *Vita Beati* as we have described them here, the question arises whether these compositions belong to emblematics - that is, whether we are dealing with emblems - *avant la lettre*, so to speak. If so, one could call the Latin version of Daniel's legend an emblem book and at the same time a

prefiguration of the religious emblem books that became so popular afterwards, particularly in the seventeenth century.

The discussion surrounding the genre question in emblematics turns out to be complicated. In emblem studies, a variety of relevant answers have been given to the question: what is it that makes an emblem an emblem? The early definitions of Mario Praz and Albrecht Schöne were especially penetrating.<sup>7</sup> However, more recent studies make it clear that their efforts to define the emblem do not do justice to the many ways this genre confronts us in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that, at best, they only circumscribe parts of the emblematic corpus. The problems surrounding possible genre definitions of the emblem in the most recent studies can be seen in their opposing tendencies: either to regard more and more of what was published conjoining text and image media in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as emblems, or to completely deny genre status to emblematics because such great variation exists among the individual instances.

In view of this difficult contradiction, Bernhard F. Scholz recently suggested viewing the emblem "as a kind of text seen as a normal form", as it is revealed "in the sense of a statistical average."<sup>8</sup> Scholz characterizes this normal emblem form as follows:

The emblem that is *normal* in this sense is a tripartite plane figure arranged vertically; it has a complete picture; it occupies an entire page; the language segment of the whole three-part text that is found above the picture consists of a single line in the great majority of cases; the section below the picture is just a few lines; and finally, the whole text, consisting of word and image, "contains" an explicit or implicit general lesson or an explicit or implicit maxim intended as a guide to behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

With this definition, Scholz adopts essential aspects of Schöne's discussion, but without attributing preferential value to the triad of *motto*, *pictura*, and *subscriptio*. If one holds up the Latin text-image configurations in Daniel Agricola's *Vita Beati* to this definition of the emblem, it becomes clear that they agree in every respect with the normal form he suggests. Especially when compared with the Early New High German version of the legend, one can see how very much the text-image combination in the Latin printing corresponds to the characteristics expected of an emblem. As it turns out, it is not the fact that the epigrams are omitted in the vernacular edition that makes the decisive difference with regard to emblematics, but rather the fact that the generalizing trait is completely absent in the superscripts. Whereas the superscripts of the chapters or woodcut images in the Early New High German version refer

clearly and concretely to the saint and his experiences, in the Latin printing this connection is only mediated through the prose text on the right-hand page. But if individual epigrams, woodcuts, and superscripts are taken together, then each text-image composition engages the recipient with a maxim for action or behaviour. This component is completely absent from the Early New High German version.

Even Schöne's determination (not mentioned by Scholz in his brief characterization) that the "double function of depiction and interpretation, representation and explication", is the essential constituent of the text-image composition is realized in the Latin printing.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in the Early New High German version, on the basis of the picture's superscript, the scene represented in each woodcut is clearly and directly related to Beatus and his activities, the same scene in the Latin version, together with its superscript and epigram, suggests an allegorical interpretation from which guidance for action or behaviour can be derived.

These obvious differences between the Latin and Early New High German versions seem rooted in differing text functions. On the one hand, the Latin version of the *Vita Beati* offers the life story of the saint, but on the other hand, based on the text-image configuration on the left facing page, it also becomes an edifying book with paraenetic character. The text-image compositions serve in themselves for meditative reflection and practice in Christian doctrine; they help additionally to imprint better their behaviour maxims in the memory. The vernacular version, in contrast, appears only to be concerned with making St Beatus' life story known to a wider public. Considering the fact that veneration for Beatus was thriving in the early sixteenth century near the Beatus caves on Lake Thun, and the faithful were making pilgrimages to the area, the Early New High German version could also be seen as a kind of advertisement.<sup>11</sup>

All things considered, the text-image compositions in the Latin edition of the *Vita Beati* can undoubtedly be called emblems, as long as we ignore the circumstance that emblematics supposedly did not yet exist in 1511, the year of the book's printing. Formulating the fundamental question in a pointed way, we ask: is there an emblematics before emblematics? Is it legitimate to consign a text-image configuration to the emblem genre when at the time of its appearance no corresponding awareness of the genre could have existed? Modern emblem studies were not the first to style Alciato as the *emblematum pater et princeps*.<sup>12</sup> The Milan jurist was already mentioned in the sixteenth century in introductions to emblem books and poetological tracts as the author of *emblemata*. The problematic genre discussion thus culminates here in the question: to what extent, in the case of emblematics, can or must the histories of genre, influence, and

reception be equated? And what importance should be attributed to today's point of view of Alciato's *Emblematum liber*, which is often called an archetype and the source of the genre's name?

It is a fact acknowledged by modern emblem studies that there are many influences at work in the origin and development of emblematics. The important role played by not only Renaissance hieroglyphics, but heraldry, medieval allegory, the *ars memorativa*, and even individual works such as the *Physiologus* is well known. As far as the understanding of genre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is concerned, however, the "opposition between the genre's establishment on the one hand and its precursors on the other" does not correspond to "the way Alciato's role in relation to emblematics was seen at the time."<sup>13</sup> The poetics and *praefationes* of emblem books mention not only Alciato, but the Egyptian hieroglyphs when discussing the origins of emblems. As a rule Alciato is regarded there as the forerunner of those who were producing emblems in early modern times.

The rich array of book illustrations brought forth during the first hundred years of printing makes it clear that Alciato's *Emblematum liber* with its text-image compositions was nothing unusual in the context of early book printing, but should be placed in the context of the numerous illustrated books produced in the first decades of printing. In view of this fact it seems inappropriate to exalt it as the actual origin of emblematics. Instead, we should see the origin in the context of that era's book culture as a whole—where the *Emblematum liber* was a typical product—a book culture that recognized and used the advantages that printing offered, not only for the reproduction of texts, but for text illustration—the woodcut as printed image.

As a practical consequence, this means that just as we need to look carefully at books combining texts and pictures that were published after 1531 in order to determine whether or not they should be categorized as emblematics, we also need to examine those that appeared before 1531 with the same careful attention. Obviously, just as not every illustrated book from this era should be considered part of emblematics, likewise—against the trend of recent research—not every illustrated broadside produced in the seventeenth century is part of that genre. But our comparison of the Latin *Vita Beati* with its Early New High German translation has shown how fluid the boundaries already were in the early period of illustrated printing.



## Conuersatio Ignominiosa

Vita almi confessoris et anachorete Beati:  
Peluectorum primi apostoli.

**R**omanis Claudio caligule  
Cui patris imperare: toto fere orbe idolo-  
rum cultus dedito: Barnabas apostolorum decreto:  
predicationis gratia anglorum scoticasque peragrauit  
provincias. Quis fidei celus innumerum ad christia-  
nam impulit religionem populum: nec dum indigenis christi  
nomen: verum etiam exteris innotuit circumiacentibus.  
Erat autem hisce in provinciis adulescens quidam  
Suetonius nomine: genere esto proclarus: multarum  
que diuitiarum copiosus: meritis vero et fide adeo exiguus:  
ut idolorum portentis diuinum exhiberet honorem: et  
genua incuruaret. Ad hunc profecto christi nomen  
cum peruenisset: haud surdus sermonis auditor: sed  
more spiritus sancti unctione fidem Christi ingenti excepit  
gratiarum actione. Cui in baptismo Beatus  
inditum est nomen. Qui dum ardentius euangelice perfectionis  
(haud segnis) meditare fore imitator: et huiusmodi  
nec posse assequi propositum: nisi omnibus denudatus  
facultatibus: pauper visceribus inclusis: nihil  
sibi preter ciliatum ad nudum corpus: simplicis ac vile  
desuper retineret amictum. Ob rem cunctis ad se egenis  
ascitis: partem non modicam in eorum necessitates:  
reliquum autem pro ecclesiis construendis: ministris alendis:  
atque dei cultura distribuit amplissima: diuitias sibi super-  
ernas (iuxta saluatoris premissum) speras comparandas.  
Vade: quicquid habes vende: et da pauperibus:  
et habebis thesaurum in celo: et veni sequere me.

A 3

Fig. 4.1. Page from Daniel Agricola, *Almi confessoris et anachorete Beati* (Basel, 1511).

**C Zu dem Ersten : wie**

sant Bat vñ stude syn zytlich güt den armen lü  
ten vñ den kñgen.

**C Das erst capitel von**

der bekennung sant Batten von der abgöttery zñ  
der erkennung des waren gottes.

**Als zu Rom regieret**

Der kaiser Claudius/ ein vetter Cai col-  
gule/ vñ schick die gāz welt vnderenig was  
abgöttery. Da durchgieng der heilig bat/ das  
das engd vñ schottelād/ vñ vñ synē kñliche  
predigen ward ein vñzelige zal des volkes be-  
ret zñ christliche glouben. Vñ vñen auch was  
ein iüngling/ Suetonius genamp/ hochgebo-  
nes adels/ grosser ryckhumb/ ader kñn mit christe-  
liche glouben/ also das er den heilsen abgötteren  
götliche ere kñnwider erzeugte. Dñer Suetoni-  
us vñderwyft in gloubē/ vñ getroust/ genamp  
ward bat. Vñ also er kñndliche betrachte/ wie  
er on die abwerffung der kñren zytlichen güttes  
mit möge erlange den weg ewiglicher vollkom-  
menheit/ lege von im synē kñsperliche kleider/ lege  
an syn blossen lryb ein grob herin hemd/ vñ dar-  
tiber ein schōnd einfaltiges kñeid beclider/ vñ brei-  
ten güt vñ armē vñ dñ dñer der kñliche. Durch de-  
gabe der gotz bñser/ bofser das ewig zñ erlange/  
nach der verberstung christi/ gāz lryb verkonft alles  
das du gāst/ vñ gibst den armen/ so wust du das  
ein schatz im hymel/ vñ lryb vñ volg mir nach.

2. ij

Fig. 4.2. Opening from Daniel Agricola, *Das leben des heiligen bychtigers vñ einsidlers sant batten/des erste Apostel des oberlands Heluetica geheissen* (Basel, 1511).





Fig. 4.3. Woodcut title for Chapter 5 of Daniel Agricola, *Almi confessoris et anachorete Beati*, Urs Graf (Basel, 1511).

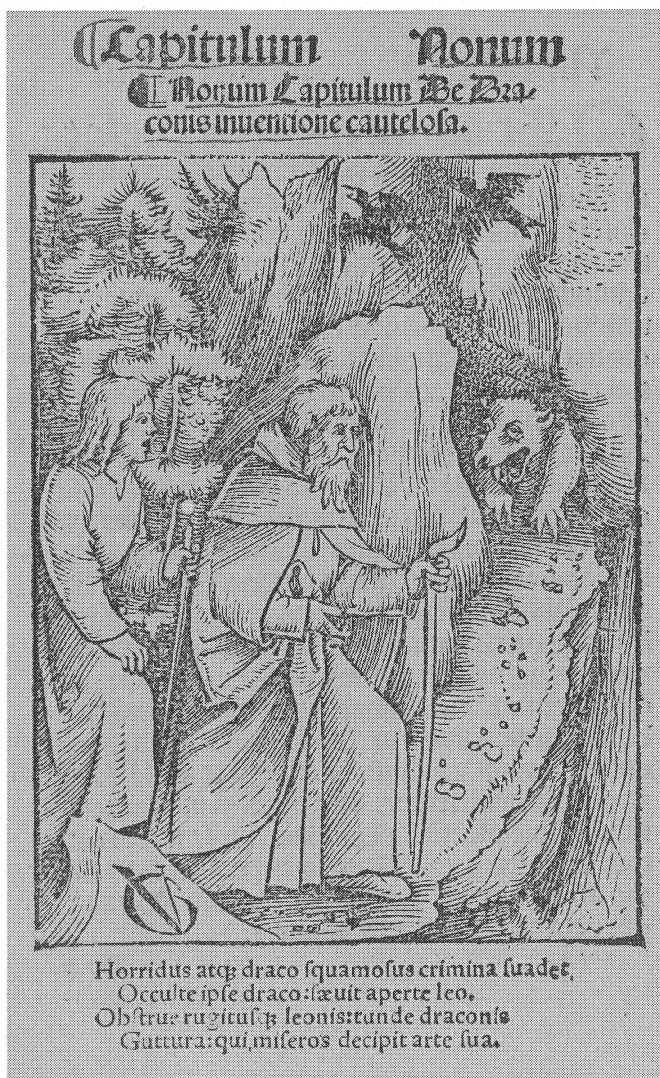


Fig. 4.4. Woodcut title for Chapter 9 of Daniel Agricola, *Almi confessoris et anachorete Beati*, Urs Graf (Basel, 1511).



Fig. 4.5. Woodcut title for Chapter 10 of Daniel Agricola, *Almi confessoris et anachorete Beati*, Urs Graf (Basel, 1511).

## Notes

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\* The English translation of this article is by Hope Hague of Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>1</sup> There is no decisive answer to the question whether the illustrations were commissioned by Alciato himself or by the Augsburg printer Heinrich Steiner (see for example Miedema 1968; Leeman 1984).

<sup>2</sup> See Praz 1964; Landwehr 1972; Landwehr 1976; Landwehr 1988.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hieronymus 1972; Hieronymus 1984.

<sup>4</sup> See below.

<sup>5</sup> See *Vulgate*, Gospel of Matthew 19, 28; *Vulgate*. Epistle to Titus 3, 5; Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 15, 16, 3; 20, 5, 2.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lauretus 1971, 365.

<sup>7</sup> See Praz 1964, 18; Schöne 1993, 21-45.

<sup>8</sup> Scholz 2002, 88; 290 (translation H.H.).

<sup>9</sup> Scholz 2002, 290 (translation H.H.).

<sup>10</sup> "Doppelfunktion des Abbildens und Auslegens, Darstellens und Deutens" (Schöne 1993, 21; translation H.H.).

<sup>11</sup> See von Känel 2005.

<sup>12</sup> See Scholz 2002, 169.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 170 (translation H.H.).